

## Levoča — The Slovak National Shrine

Of many Slovak Catholic shrines only Levoča in eastern Slovakia has remained a symbol of religious resistance to communist rule. Traditionally on the eve of 7 July up to a hundred thousand pilgrims surge into the hilly baroque town of Levoča despite many obstacles put in their way. These can be quite formidable. Last year, for instance, most schools in the area put on special activities for the day, although it was Saturday, in order to prevent young people from taking part. In a school of nursing the director announced that anyone joining the pilgrims need not bother turning up for the new academic year in September. Notices explicitly banning participation were displayed in many schools while a number of teachers were sent to Levoča to spy on their own pupils. By coincidence, Peter Nagy, a famous Slovak pop-star, was giving a concert in the nearby hamlet of Cingove at the same time as Mass was being said in Levoča. The buses and trains did not run. The police set up so many road checks that people had to wait in traffic jams for many hours, keeping their spirits up by singing hymns. Many had to come on foot, setting off at dawn. The last few hundred yards were particularly difficult. Huge oak trees were cut down and left lying across the road to the basilica, ostensibly for public safety. Priests were checked for "confession permits" and those who had forgotten to bring them were not allowed to officiate. During the cold Saturday night many people lit fires among the tents. This was used as a pretext by the police, who raided the area in order to extinguish the fires, demolishing hundreds of tents and trampling over the people in the process. Yet more pilgrims were ar-

rising throughout the night. In spite of all these difficulties the *samizdat* sources estimate that more people, particularly the young, come every year.

Last year in Levoča was special. Stefan Garaj, the vicar-general of the diocese, which like most dioceses in Czechoslovakia is without a bishop, read out a papal decree raising the shrine to the status of a minor basilica (*pace* the Roman technicalities). A girl came up to the altar at the end of the Mass and bravely read out a letter from some Slovak young people. "Dear Father, we thank you and the Holy Father for giving us this new Marian Basilica. We thank the Pope especially for his love and encouragement. As a token of gratitude we would like you to accept this cross, commemorating St Methodius, the apostle to the Slavs. [Next year is the 1100th anniversary of his death — *Ed.*] We ask you to give us your blessing."

Slightly overwhelmed, Fr Garaj thanked the girl for her courage and gave her the blessing. In his address he mentioned his predecessor, Bishop Vojtaššák, who had been imprisoned by the communists and never returned to Slovakia. "I consecrate you all to God, our Father, and to Mary, the Mother of God." As if by order thousands of wooden home-made crosses rose up from among the crowds.

Anonymous *samizdat* authors from whose writings this report was compiled have no doubt in their minds; after decades of suffering quietly, the Slovak Catholics have come out in defiance of the atheist state. There is a remarkable religious revival in Slovakia.

ALEXANDER TOMSKÝ

## Romanian Baptists under New Leadership

The Romanian Baptist Union Congress held in April 1984 was confined to just one day instead of the planned three, and was restricted to the election of a new Executive Committee and other formal business. The constitutional amendment which was due to be put before the Congress and which would have further eroded the independence of the local churches was not in fact

discussed. The Congress was very much a "low-key" event, with attendance limited to a few hundred at most, compared with the two thousand who attended the last Congress, in 1977. The new President, Mihai Hušan, did not have an entirely uncompromised past record, but he certainly did not have the reputation for consistent loyalty to the government enjoyed by his pre-